
BRITTANY
Through Railways
Other Railways
REFERENCE TO ROADS
HEIGHT OF LAND
METRES
300
200
100
Sea Level
GOLFE DE ST MALO
FINISTERE
COTES DU NORD
MORBIHAN
BREST
MORLAIX
Lannion
Guingamp
ST BRIEUC
ST MALO
DINAN
Loudeac
Pontivy
QUIMPER
Douarnenez
Concarneau
Quimperle
Hennebont
LORIENT
VANNES
Redon
Ploermel
ST NAZAIRE
Quiberon
Belle Ile
I. de Groix
Crozon
Landerneau
Longitude West of Greenwich

F. Muirhead, *Brittany* (London, 1925)
National Gallery of Art Library, Washington

Seeking the "Primitive" in Brittany

The strength and persistence of Brittany's Celtic heritage set it apart from the rest of France. To many who traveled to the region in the nineteenth century it must have seemed almost a foreign country. Peasants spoke a language unrelated to French. Ancient monoliths and the mists of Arthurian legend kept its pagan past feeling quite current. It produced no wine—and almost unique in France, still doesn't.

First to "discover" Brittany were romantic writers, drawn by its primitive mystery and the thrall of waves crashing at Finistère (literally "land's end"). Descriptions by Chateaubriand, Balzac, Stendhal, Hugo, and other writers attracted visual artists in turn. The English painter J. M. W. Turner visited in 1826; Corot made seven trips between 1829 and 1865. By the mid-1860s, inns in the small town of Pont-Aven were filled with artists, many foreign-born. An American, Robert Wylie, transformed a local chateau into a free arts academy, establishing the first colony of American painters in France.

Most of these artists were seeking picturesque landscapes and scenes of peasant life. But Paul Gauguin, the artist we look at most closely in this section, was not interested in ethnography. Gauguin was drawn to Brittany for the expressive power of its "primitive" culture, a power he hoped to tap into and convey in his work. For Gauguin and his followers, the Breton land and people became starting points for an exploration of color and form as modes of expression.

Cows graze in Brittany
Philippe Giraud/Corbis

Background: Brittany

Setting

- Brittany is a flattened upland known as the Armorican Massif, with Precambrian rocks more than 540 million years old; the ancient mountains have mostly worn down, leaving the highest elevation at 417 m (1,368 ft.).
- The coastline along both the English Channel and Atlantic is rugged and dramatic, deeply indented with bays; on the Atlantic side, especially, ocean currents moderate the climate.
- Large, undulating heaths occupy much of the inland area, with only a few remaining bits of the once-dense Armorican forest that figured in Arthurian legend.

History

- Brittany has more neolithic stone monuments than any other place on earth, including thousands of menhirs (from Breton "long stone"); dating from about 4500 BC, they were erected by the peoples who preceded the arrival of Celtic Gauls.
- In 56 BC Julius Caesar made Brittany part of the Roman empire; penetration of Roman culture, however, remained superficial.
- In the 5th and 6th centuries AD, invading Anglo-Saxons drove British Celts to Brittany—thus the name Bretagne, or "little Britain."
- Missionaries from the British Isles converted the population to Christianity, but old pagan myths, legends, and customs remained strong for centuries.
- Brittany was formally incorporated as a part of France in 1532 but retained many local privileges; throughout the 19th century it remained a conservative region, preserving old social structures and religious customs.

Today

- Brittany is linked with other Celtic cultures by tradition, language, and music; the Breton name for Brittany is *Breizh*.
- Major cities include the capital Rennes, Brest, Lorient, and Quimper; industry remains fairly limited but the telecommunications sector is growing.
- The rural population is mostly engaged in animal husbandry; Brittany is a large milk producer but is also known for cauliflower and artichokes.
- Fishing, though reduced from past levels, remains an important economic activity.
- Tourism, especially in the coastal towns, has grown.
- In 2004 the population numbered just over 3 million.

Celtic culture: language, music, and religion

Today many aspects of Brittany's Celtic culture remain strong. At least 300,000 people understand Breton, a language related to Cornish and Welsh. In the 1930s that number was closer to one million; when the painters we discuss traveled to the western parts of Brittany in the late nineteenth century, about half the population spoke only Breton. Schools are now teaching Breton again, and a Breton literature has re-emerged.

Compare a few words in…

Breton	Welsh	French	English
ker	tre	ville	town
mor	mo[+r]	mer	sea
krampouez	crempoq	crêpe	pancake
bihan	bychan	petit	small
mat	da	bon	good

Since the 1970s Breton music has shared in the wide revival of Celtic music. Hundreds of *fest-noz* (night dances) take place each year. Typical of Breton music are historical ballads and a kind of response singing in which a second singer repeats and then responds to a lyric sung by the first, driving the music forward. Traditional instruments include the *biniou* and other types of bagpipe, the *bombarde* (related to and played like an oboe, but louder), harps, whistles, accordions, flutes, and fiddles. Dances like the gavotte were part of village festivals and family celebrations, and have many local variations. Somewhat unusually among folk traditions, Breton dances are accompanied by singing as well as instrumental music.

Another strong feature of Breton culture was the fervent religious belief of Brittany's peasants. The seven founder saints (many unrecognized by Rome) are still venerated in an ancient rite called the *tro-Breizh* (tour of Brittany), in which pilgrims walk about 600 km (almost 373 mi.) around the province to visit each of the saints' pilgrimage churches in turn. Villages celebrate their saints' feast days with a *pardon*, a long procession and mass, which often retains echoes of ancient pagan practices.

Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret | French, 1852–1929

The Pardon in Brittany, 1886
Oil on canvas, 45 x 35 ⅜ in.

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Gift of George F. Baker, 1931 (31.132.34)

Gastronomie

No part of Brittany is very far from the sea, so fish and shellfish are plentiful. Breton oysters have designations of origin like fine wines and are described in similar terms. Paimpolaise are plump and taste of iodine. Cancale are not very meaty but have a distinct salty taste. Probably the most celebrated are Belon oysters, with a nutty aftertaste. Before the sixteenth century, most of the salt in Europe came from Brittany, and today chefs prize the coarse and slightly gray Sel de Guérande, evaporated from seawater.

Pancakes are a Breton specialty, part of its tradition of simple rural fare. In eastern Brittany thin crepes made with wheat flour are served for dessert with sweet fillings like fruit, honey, or chocolate. In the west buckwheat crepes, called *galettes*, are filled with ham, egg, cheese, and other savory foods—or simply eaten with butter and a bit of salt.

Galettes de Sarrasin (Buckwheat Crepes)

- 1 cup buckwheat flour
- ¼ cup unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 ½ tsp. Guérande sea salt, or to taste
- ¾ cup milk
- 1 ½ cups water
- 3 eggs
- 1 tbs. melted butter

Sift the flours and salt together in a bowl. Whisk in the milk and water until smooth. Beat the eggs and whisk in batter. Let stand 1 to 2 hours. Heat a frying pan and brush lightly with some of the butter. Ladle the batter onto the hot pan and tilt to spread. Cook about 1 minute, flip and cook about 30 seconds more. Serve with a filling of your choice, accompanied by cider.

Vocabulaire

aber (m): deep river inlet, gorge

cidre (m): cider

crêpe (f): thin pancake

galette (f): cake; also buckwheat griddlecake

huître (f): oyster

meule (f): grain stack or rick; also millstone

sable (m): sand

sabot (m): wooden shoe

sel (m): salt

Learn about Breton and other Celtic music:
www.ceolas.org/ceolas.html (in English)

Check fest-noz dates, places, and scheduled musicians:
www.fest-noz.net (in English, French, and Breton)

Read more about the Breton language, even take an online course:
www.kervarker.org (in English, French, Breton, Spanish, and German)

The Works

reproduction slide 31 I CD 60	Paul Gauguin French, 1848–1903	*Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven*, 1888 Oil on canvas, 28 ¾ x 36 ½ in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.19

Gauguin wrote to art dealer Théo van Gogh (brother of Vincent), "I am doing a gavotte bretonne: three little girls dancing in a hayfield… The painting seems original to me, and I am quite pleased with the composition."[1] The subject itself was a familiar one; Breton dances, religious processions, and other peasant scenes were shown with some frequency at the Salon. Parisian audiences would have recognized the girls' triangular bonnets, broad collars, and wooden shoes immediately. The town of Pont-Aven and its church spire can be seen in the background.

But Gauguin's aim was not to present an anecdotal view of Breton life; his eye was trained on artistic concerns of color and form per se. His dancers loom overlarge in front of a stone wall, their size emphasized by small heaps of grain. Their linked arms suggest a sinuous chain and create a patterning of zigzags that seems to fence them into a narrow space, an effect enhanced by strong contrasts of color: the dark dresses and white collars, the brilliant poppies attached to their aprons and the green of new hay.

Consider this

Gauguin was very pleased with his design for *Breton Girls Dancing*. Consider why by covering up certain elements with appropriately colored pieces of paper. Note how the picture changes when you remove parts of the composition:

- *the diagonal line of stones—diminishes the asymmetrical dynamism of the picture and the outward thrust of the girl's arm*
- *the two red flowers—dulls the color scheme and eliminates back-and-forth movement of the eye*
- *the vertical steeple, chimneys, and trees in the background—deadens energy by eliminating upward extension of figure group*

The three dancing girls are almost identical in size, dress, hair color, and facial features. Why do you think Gauguin represented them this way?

- *to treat them as abstract visual elements rather than real people*
- *to suggest movement over time, as if one person is shown at three different points of the dance*

The linked bodies of the girls suggest a semicircle. Can you find other groupings of three that form or suggest semicircles?

Imagine you are dressed as the girls are. Would your head, body, and feet feel different than they do now? What activities that you enjoy would be difficult in those clothes? What does this indicate about the girls' daily activities?

What role does the dog play in the painting? Is it there to add a note of humor, to elaborate the narrative, or as a spot of brown where it's needed?

In 1889 the owner of a café across from the World Fair's official art exhibition was persuaded to host a showing of works by the "Groupe impressioniste et synthétiste"—Gauguin and his Pont-Aven followers. Other artists, including Cézanne and Pissarro, also participated. Known as the Volponi exhibition, it included Gauguin's first attempts at printmaking, including this lithograph.

CD 61 | **Paul Gauguin**

Pleasures of Brittany (Joies de Bretagne), 1889
Lithograph (zinc) in black on yellow wove paper, 8 1⁄16 x 9 1⁄16 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Andrew W. Mellon Fund 1978.54.1

Synthétisme

Gauguin and the artists who gathered around him in Brittany believed that art should be a synthesis of three things: outward appearance, the artist's feelings in front of what he or she sees, and purely aesthetic considerations of color and form. The term *synthétisme* was coined for the 1889 Volponi exhibition Gauguin and colleagues organized opposite the official art show of the *Exposition universelle*. The participants were interested in moving beyond impressionism's visual transcription of nature. For them the landscape—or any subject—was merely a starting point. Their goals were both more personal and focused on the work of art per se. As artist Maurice Denis would say in 1890, "It is well to remember that a picture before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."[2] By flattening space and applying color in broad, flat areas without modulation, and by repeating rhythms for overall effect, synthetist artists ordered and simplified sensory data. Not limited by realistic details, they could concentrate on intangibles of feeling and expression. Although the synthetists still grounded their art in the real world, their flat space and nondescriptive color would be important influences on artists in the early twentieth century who went on to pursue an art of pure abstraction.

Paul Sérusier

The Talisman, 1888
Oil on wood, 10 ½ x 8 ½ in.

Paris, Musée d'Orsay/Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

Another of the artists working in Brittany was Paul Sérusier. As Gauguin instructed him to apply his colors "straight from the tube," Sérusier painted a landscape with barely recognizable connection to the natural world:

"You see these trees as what color?" questioned Gauguin.

"They are yellow."

"Well, then, put down yellow. And that shadow?"

"Rather blue."

"Don't be afraid to paint it as blue as possible. Use pure ultramarine. And those red leaves? Use vermilion."[3]

The result was one of the first paintings to approach pure abstraction, its forms and colors so reduced as to be nearly free from description. For several of the young artists, the painting seemed to have an almost living power and they called it *The Talisman*.

CD 62	Paul Gauguin French, 1848–1903	*Landscape at Le Pouldu*, 1890 Oil on canvas, 28 ⅞ x 36 ⅜ in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.20

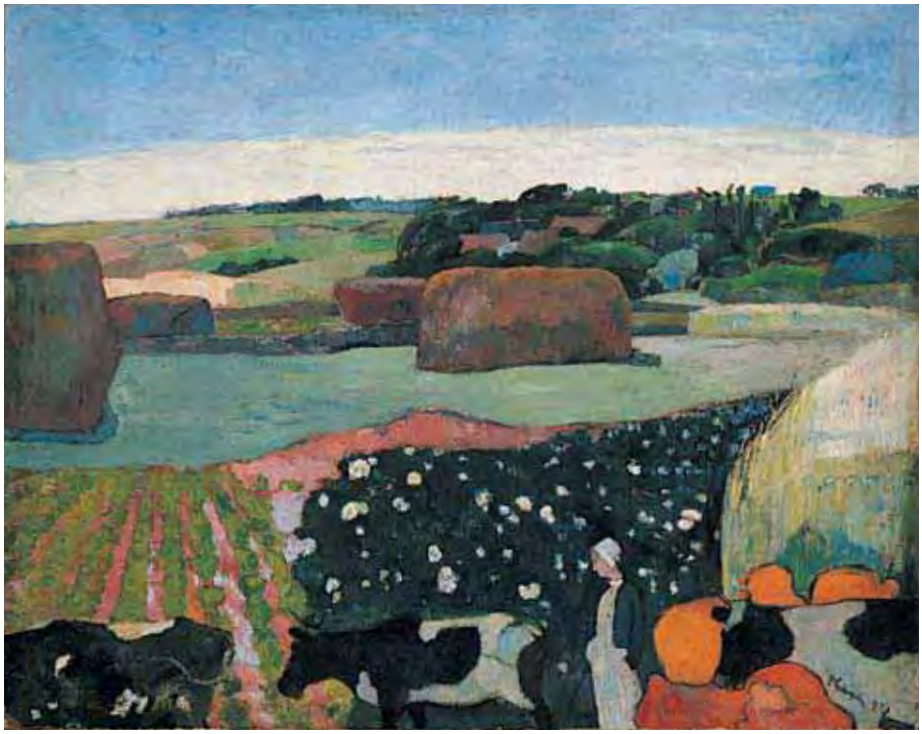
By 1889 Gauguin found Pont-Aven overcrowded. Seeking a more isolated and less expensive environment he and several colleagues took up residence in Le Pouldu, a small village on the Atlantic coast. Only 20 km (about 12 mi.) distant, it had nonetheless a totally different feel: more rural, with open fields and trees deformed by wind.

Gauguin and his confreres made many expeditions to the outlying countryside. Here we see the undulating hills of the Kerzellec valley. Despite its proximity to the ocean, much of the economy in this region was agricultural, based in the *armor*, the ancient Celtic term for the fertile land bordering the coast. (In Roman times Brittany was called Armorica.) Gauguin wrote to Van Gogh about the orangey-pink sand that farmers hauled in from the coast to lighten the dense soil: "pink and not yellow sand," he emphasized. A Scottish artist wrote of Le Pouldu:

Imagine a country of gigantic sand dunes, like the mountainous waves of solid sea, between which appeared glimpses of the Bay of Biscay and the Atlantic rollers. All this, peopled by a savage-looking race, who seemed to do nothing but search for drift-wood, or to collect seaweed, with strange sledges drawn by shaggy ponies; and with women in black dresses, who wore the great black 'coif' (like a huge black sun-bonnet). Gauguin has given us the exact spirit of the place…[4]

Landscapes like this one were not painted entirely outdoors. Gauguin stressed to his colleagues the need to work from sketches and especially memory. "Don't copy nature too literally," he advised. "Art is abstraction; draw art as you dream in nature's presence, and think more about the act of creation than about the final result."[5]

slide 32 CD 63	Paul Gauguin French, 1848–1903	*Haystacks in Brittany*, 1890 Oil on canvas, 29 ¼ x 36 ⅞ in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.11



This stylized view of fields and farm buildings near Le Pouldu is typical of the *synthétiste* works that Gauguin made in Brittany in 1890. Its forms are simplified, abstracted to their essence. In 1888 Gauguin had defined his goal as a synthesis of form and color obtained by observing "only the dominant element."

The friezelike procession of cows and cowherd in the foreground coaxes our gaze to move horizontally, and we find that the entire composition is arranged into patchwork bands, layered one on the other. Even the sky is stratified. Exploited especially in the black-and-white cows and the flowering crops, strong contrasts of dark and light flatten forms, rendering them more decorative than descriptive. The vivid and unexpected oranges in the foreground exaggerate nature and cast it according to the artist's imagination. Notice how the silhouette of the cow at right is outlined against the orange with dark blue. In many places similar outlines compartmentalize colors, in the manner of cloisonné enamels or stained glass.

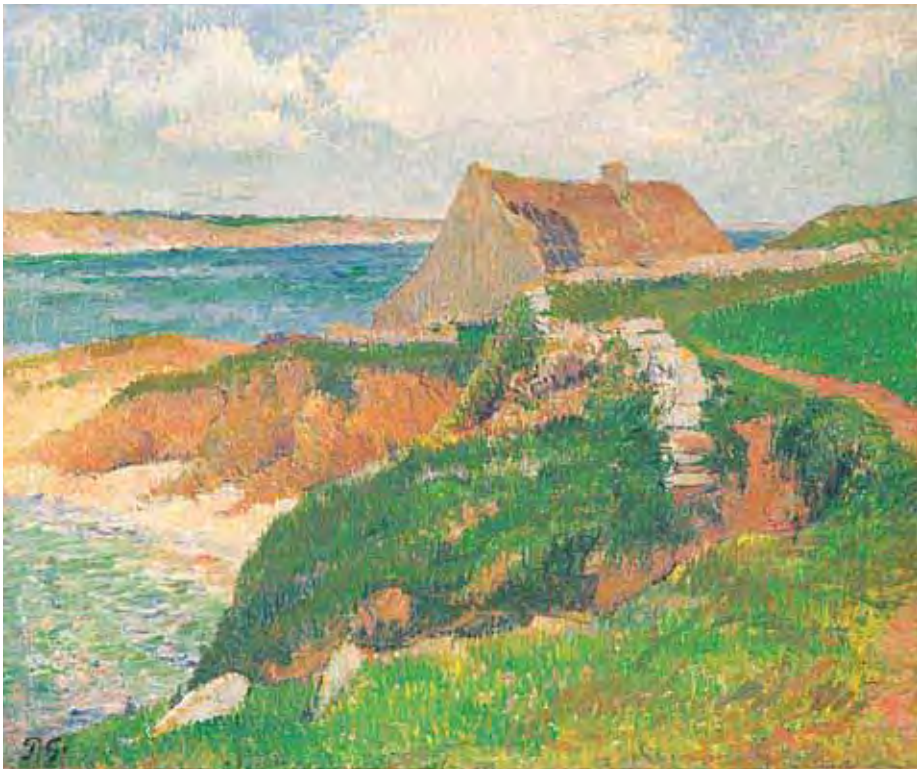
In this painting, made before he had embraced the flat color spaces of later pictures, Gauguin's admiration for Cézanne is evident, especially in the tightly parallel brushstrokes. While the observation of the landscape reveals Gauguin's impressionist roots, the overall, tapestrylike pattern tends to flatten the scene and create a decorative surface.

CD 64 | Paul Gauguin

Brittany Landscape, 1888
Oil on canvas, 28 x 35 ¼ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.148

Henri Moret was another of Gauguin's followers in Le Pouldu. He used the sort of parallel brushstrokes Gauguin himself had adopted from Cézanne.



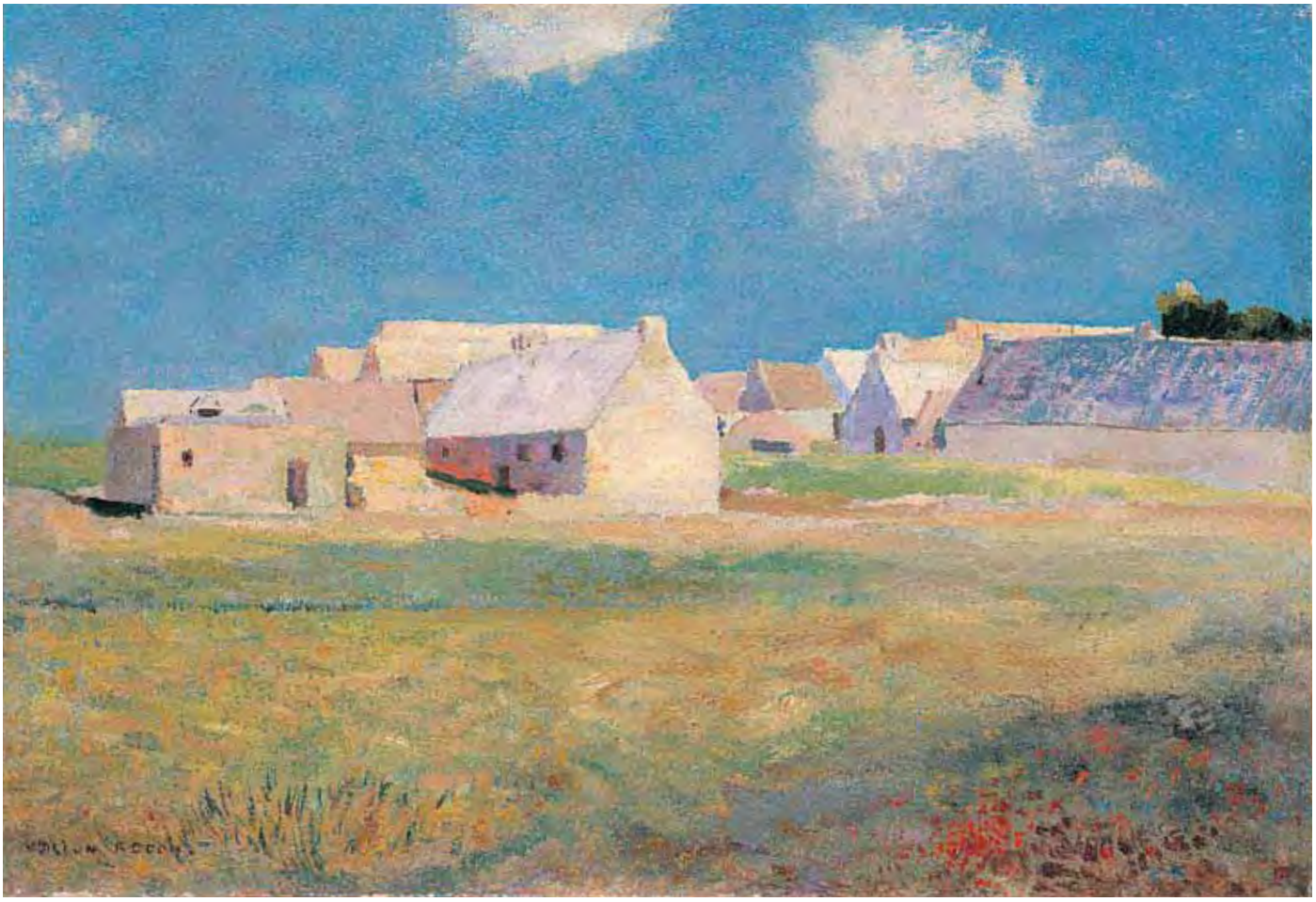
CD 65 | Henri Moret | French, 1856–1913

The Island of Raguenez, Brittany, 1890/1895
Oil on canvas, 21 ¼ x 25 ½ in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.46

slide 33 CD 66	Paul Gauguin French, 1848–1903	*Pair of Wooden Shoes (Sabots)*, 1889/1890 Polychromed oak, leather, and iron nails, 5 1/16 x 12 7/8 x 4 7/16 in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.239

While in Brittany Gauguin often wore native costumes of embroidered shirts, heavy woolen sweaters, and *sabots* (wooden shoes), such as this pair, which he carved and decorated. We know he sometimes wore the rough *sabots* in Paris, but he may have made this pair only for decorative purposes. Gauguin did not limit his artistic activity to painting. In his rejection of Western, industrialized society and quest for authenticity, Gauguin regarded all crafts — he produced ceramics and woodcarvings — to be of equal artistic merit and value as painting and sculpture. He was among the first to eliminate the distinction between high art and decoration.



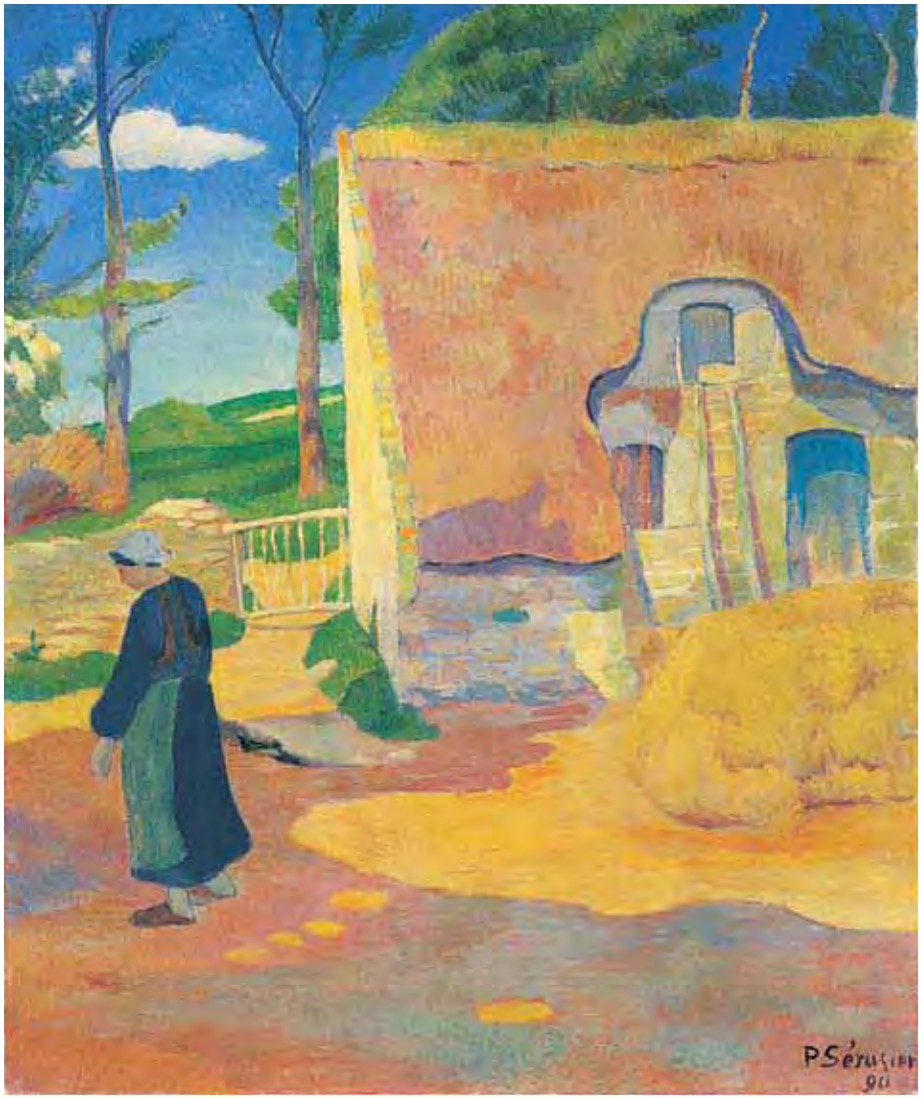
CD 67	Odilon Redon French, 1840–1916	*Breton Village*, c. 1890 Oil on canvas, 9 x 13 in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1994.59.11

Odilon Redon had painted *plein-air* landscapes from 1865 or so, when he left the studio of the academic painter with whom he briefly studied. He continued to produce them even while he was creating his *noirs*, the often macabre charcoal drawings he reproduced as lithographs. He intended the *noirs* for public consumption, the landscapes for private purposes, calling them "studies for becoming an artist." Straightforward and painted with strong, saturated colors, most of Redon's outdoor studies were created before 1890, when he turned from the *noirs* to use color in his studio works.

Redon had discovered Brittany by 1870 and returned often. But he found the countryside in his home county of the Médoc more to his liking. In July 1875 he wrote from Quimper:

It's there the North begins, it's the sky that presses obstinately, heavy and hard, on men… It rains, it falls slowly, heavy mist. Everything is sad… All nature, man and landscape, seems to feel the weight of the end of time… Sad country, crushed under somber colors.[6]

reproduction slide 34 I CD 68	Paul Sérusier French, 1863–1927	*Farmhouse at Le Pouldu*, 1890 Oil on canvas, 28 3/8 x 23 5/8 in.	National Gallery of Art, Washington Gift (Partial and Promised) of Alexander M and Judith W. Laughlin 2000.95.1



Sérusier painted a typical Breton farmhouse, with its stone walls and low-hanging thatched roof, but his true subject is color and form. The undulating line of the roof becomes a foil for the sunlight that spreads on the ground in a yellow pool. Three-dimensional space is flattened and the complexities of color reduced, contained within clear outlines. His painting is informed by *synthétisme*, which Sérusier first embraced with Gauguin in Brittany and later expounded with the Nabis. Synthetists held that art is separate from mere experience, and should be organized by principles of art and pictorial unity. Gauguin urged Sérusier not to paint simply what was before his eyes but to translate what he felt in front of a landscape, giving license to simplify form, exaggerate color, and transpose reality.

Consider this

Do you think Sérusier's farmhouse is the family dwelling? A barn? Look at the 1938 photograph of this farm compound (below) for more clues.

What is represented by the gold-colored material surrounding the haystack? Is it the same as the four golden circles behind the woman?

What color are the shadows in this picture? How does the arrangement of warm and cool colors affect your impression of the space depicted?

Synthétiste paintings were inspired as much by what the artist felt at a certain place as by what he saw there. What emotions or thoughts does this painting produce in you?

What is the approximate ratio of man-made to natural forms in this painting?

What techniques harmonize them into a unified form?

- *shape*
- *color*
- *fall of shadow*
- *relatively uniform, thin brushstrokes*

Photograph of the farm that Sérusier painted, 1938
Musée de Pont-Aven

The Artists

Paul Gauguin
French, 1848–1903

Paul Gauguin with his palette, 1888
John Rewald Papers, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives

Paul Gauguin was born in Paris but spent most of the first six years of his life in Peru. His great-grandfather had been a Peruvian diplomat, and Gauguin would always play up his exotic roots, claiming—with little evidence beyond his craggy profile—to have Inca blood. His maternal grandmother was the noted feminist and socialist writer Flora Tristan. After completing his education in Orléans, Gauguin joined the merchant marine and later entered the French navy. He served until 1871, when he started work at the Paris stock exchange.

In the early 1870s, Gauguin began to paint as a hobby and to collect works by the impressionists. He worked with Cézanne and Pissarro, who was a mentor. In 1883, following a market crash, Gauguin abandoned his life as a stockbroker to paint full-time. He participated in the impressionists' last four group exhibitions, but impressionism's preoccupation with visual effects did not satisfy him for long. Like contemporary symbolist writers, he sought to portray what could not be seen, to express interior states rather than surface appearances.

Seeking both a cheaper place to live and relief from bourgeois convention, in 1886 Gauguin went to the town of Pont-Aven in Brittany, where an art colony already flourished. In Brittany, with its rugged landscape and fervently religious peasants, Gauguin hoped to tap the expressive potential he believed he would find in a more rural, even "primitive" culture. He wrote in an 1888 letter: "I love Brittany; I find there the savage, the primitive. When my clogs ring out on this granite soil, I hear the dull, muted, powerful tone which I seek in my painting."[7] In Pont-Aven Gauguin became the center of a group of avant-garde artists, including Émile Bernard and Sérusier, who dedicated themselves to an artistic philosophy they called *synthétisme*. Influenced in part by Bernard's interest in stained glass, Gauguin transformed his use of color, applying it in broad, flat areas outlined with dark paint. His new style enhanced color's inherent emotive qualities, its ability to communicate intangibles.

Over the next several years, Gauguin shuttled between Paris and Brittany, traveled also to Panama and Martinique, and spent a few months with Vincent van Gogh in Arles. His rejection of European urban values finally led Gauguin to Tahiti in 1891. He expected to find an unspoiled, exotic, and sensual culture, but was confronted instead with a world already transformed by Western civilization. The primitive Tahiti he painted was largely his own invention. Apart from one return visit to France, Gauguin spent his remaining years, many of them marred by ill health and depression, in the South Seas.

Odilon Redon
French, 1840–1916

Odilon Redon in his studio
Paris, Archives Larousse/Bridgeman Art Library

Odilon Redon was born in Bordeaux, the same year as Monet, yet his art was untouched by impressionism. He rejected both the sterile forms of academic painting in which he trained and impressionism's reliance on appearance, believing instead that art should convey an inner experience, more than surface reality. He found like-minded artists and poets among the symbolists, including Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. Early in his career, Redon was known for works executed in charcoal and reproduced as lithographs. These images—*noirs* (blacks) he called them—revealed bizarre and dreamlike states, often macabre and disturbing. The critic and novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans called Redon the "prince of mysterious dreams." Perhaps more than any previous artist, Redon linked his images with the written word through captions and titles, and in producing drawings for Baudelaire's collection of poems, *Les Fleurs du mal* (first published 1857, *The Flowers of Evil*).

About 1890, when he was fifty years old, Redon turned away from the *noirs* to celebrate color in pastels and oil paintings. Although their lyricism contrasts with the melancholy *noirs*, these works were still driven by Redon's

highly personal, dreamlike vision. Redon was enthusiastically embraced by the next generation of painters, including Gauguin, who saw him as a kind of spiritual precursor.

Paul Sérusier
French, 1863–1927

Paul Sérusier in Brittany, 1890s
Musée de Pont-Aven

Paul Sérusier, born in Paris to a wealthy family that owned a *parfumerie*, was one of the young artists who joined Gauguin's following in Brittany. He first arrived in Pont-Aven in 1888 after years of study at the Académie Julien, Paris' largest private art academy. There he was noted for wide-ranging intellectual pursuits as well as artistic promise. He received an honorable mention at the Salon of 1888, the same year he went to Brittany. When he arrived in Pont-Aven, he shared meals with other "serious" artists, French and foreign-born, who were drawn in large numbers by Brittany's picturesque land and peasant life. His interest, however, was aroused by the passionate discussions of a small group of diners who sat apart, including Gauguin, Bernard, and several others. They were identified as "impressionists" but were, in fact, taking painting in a new direction.

A small painting Sérusier made on a wooden panel under Gauguin's direction (see p. 110) was one of the most abstract works ever to have been painted to that time. When Sérusier returned to Paris, he took *The Talisman*, as it was called, with him, using it to explain synthetism to friends and fellow students, including Maurice Denis and Pierre Bonnard. Together with them and other artists, Sérusier would go on to form the Nabis (from the Hebrew word for prophet), an artistic/quasi-mystical group devoted to the pursuit of synthetist principles. Brittany, Sérusier said, was "my real homeland because it was there I was born in spirit."[8]